ON PIGEON HOUSES IN CHURCHES.[1]

By J. T. MICKLETHWAITE, F.S.A.

About twenty years ago I was working under the late Sir Gilbert Scott on some repairs at Selby Abbey, and as architects are expected to know all about everything, I was called upon to explain an appearance in the north-west tower of the church, which the local antiquaries had failed to make anything of. A chamber in that tower has in its walls a number of holes an inch or so in diameter and arranged in rows. In some of the holes there remain, or did then remain, the ends of wooden pegs which had been broken off short at the surface of the wall. I was obliged to account for what was there in some way, to keep up my character; and, seeing that the pegs appeared to have been intended to carry some rough shelving which could easily be divided by upright partitions to form pigeon holes, I gave my opinion that it had been so, and that the chamber had been fitted up for a pigeon house at some date unknown but perhaps as far back as the thirteenth century. As not seldom happens, when an architect's opinion has been sought and obtained, nobody agreed with me. A suggestion in the romantic or hyper-ecclesiastical style might have had believers, but it was perhaps too much to expect them for one that the monks liked pigeon pies for themselves and their guests, and took care to provide the means of obtaining them. But I think I was right. I had heard before of spare places in the towers and roofs of churches being used for pigeon houses. And, although such a case was generally quoted as an abuse only grown up in the careless Hanoverian times, there seemed to me nothing in the use itself which would

[1] Read in the Architectural Section at the Annual Meeting of the Institute, at Leamington, August 11th, 1888.

scandalise the churchmen of the middle ages. So I began to note down such examples as I chanced from time to time to meet with, and although my opportunities have not been great, I have enough now to shew that at least the use did exist in England as far back as the thirteenth century and in places far apart. When Mr. R. S. Ferguson was preparing his paper on "Culver-houses,"[1] I intended to have given him my list of examples in churches, as it is too short to build an independent paper upon. But his was ready sooner than I expected, so this must appear as a sort of postscript to it. The chief reason for putting it forth at all is that it may lead to the noting of further examples, for there must be others, and perhaps many.

There is written evidence of the existence of a pigeon house in the church roof at Yarmouth in a passage from the accounts of Denis Hyndolweston *Custos* of the cell of Yarmouth, quoted by the late Mr. A. W. Morant, in a paper on Yarmouth Church, in the *Proceedings of the Norfolk and Norwich Archæological Society* (vol. vii., p. 232). Making up his account for the year 1484-5, this Denis enters "De colūbari sup' voltā ejusdē capelle c'cit' iij^{xii} pipiones expens' in familia," that is "about three dozen pigeons from the pigeon house above the chapel vault used in the household." Here we find the pigeons kept in the space between the vaulted ceiling of the chapel and the wood roof, a very convenient place for the purpose, and one which we shall see was so used elsewhere.

The parish church of SS. Peter and Paul, Marlborough, has a vaulted chancel of the fifteenth century, and I have an old note about pigeons being kept in the loft above. So I wrote to our member Mr. C. E. Ponting, of Marlborough, to know whether any traces of them remain now. From him I learn that the church suffered "restoration" in 1863, when amongst other mischief the east gable was "rebuilt, and a new window put in to light the loft over the chancel, taking the place of the narrow open slit, through which the pigeons entered, and which was fitted with alighting boards or flat louvres. The loft is approached by the original turret stair at north-east angle

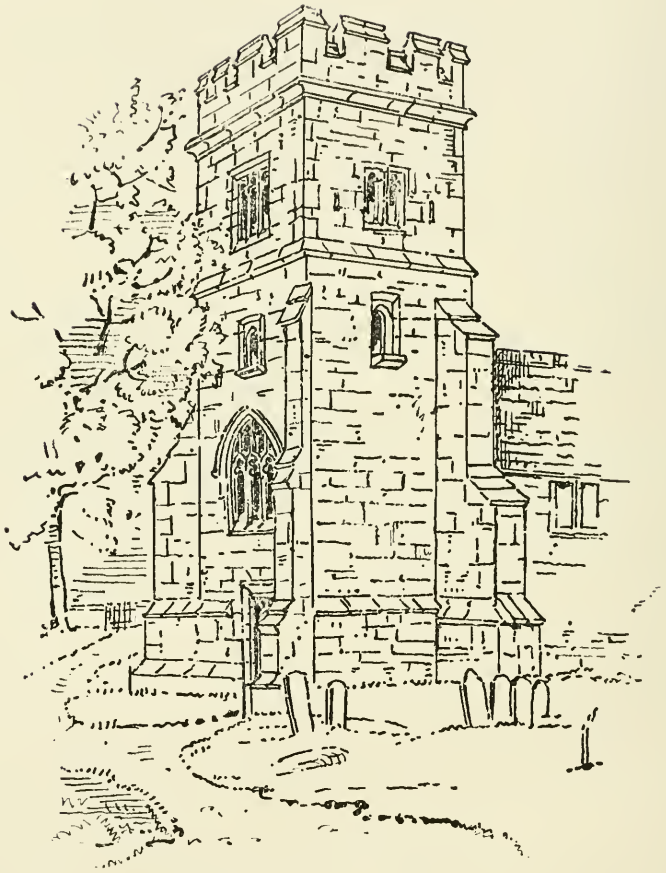
[1] Journal, v. xliv., p. 105.

of chancel, but has never had a floor, the back of the vaulting being visible." Mr. Ponting did not find any evidence of there having been stone nesting holes in the walls, but was good enough to make enquiries amongst his friends and to send me a note from one who remembers the place before it was "restored," and who says that "pigeon boxes were arranged round the whole of the walls near to the slates." The fittings were therefore of wood, as I supposed them to have been at Selby. Mr. Ponting seems to think that the use of the place for a pigeon house is only modern, and was the doing of a rector who held the church from 1829 or 1830 up to 1858. But both the pigeons and the entrance to their house are plainly shewn in the print of the church, in the second volume, of Neale's "Views of Collegiate and Parochial Churches," published in 1825. And the whole arrangement of the place is so like that at Elkstone to be described next, that I think it was intended for their use from the first.

At Elkstone, in Gloucestershire, is a vaulted chancel with a chamber over it, reached by a winding stair, which is in this case at the north-west corner. There are no pigeons there now, but tradition tells that there were formerly. The arrangement agrees perfectly with that at Marlborough, but the chancel is of the twelfth century.

In the *Ecclesiologist*, for 1865, p. 313 it is noted of Overbury Church, Worcestershire, that "some twenty years ago the space above the vaulting of the chancel was used as a pigeon house." I have no further particulars, but this is enough to shew that here is another like the two last.

At Crondall, near Farnham, there is a fine vaulted chancel of the twelfth century with a stair on the north side as at Elkstone leading to the loft above the vault. I could hear nothing of pigeons there, and the "restorer" has been at work, and has taken away any positive evidence of them, which there may have been. But the resemblance to the examples at Marlborough and Elkston is such that the use of all three must have been the same. And the staircase, which in each case leads direct to the space above the vault, shews that it was



Birlingham Church, near Pershore.

wished to have easy access to it, and I cannot think of any use other than that of a pigeon house for which it would be wanted.

I have now mentioned four, or if we count that at Yarmouth, five examples of vaulted chancels with pigeon houses above them. The number is not large, but seeing how little vaulting was used in English country churches I think it is enough to raise the thought that where it was used it was common to make the space in the roof above it into a pigeon house.

Professor J. H. Middleton, in a paper on Stanley St. Leonard's Church in the fifth volume of the *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archæological Society*, says of the north transept of that church above the flat ceiling, "there is a boarded floor, and the space above in the roof has been used as a *columbarium*. The walls are full of pigeon holes all round, and these have evidently been built with the walls and are not additions. Access to this chamber was given by a round arched Norman door in the north wall of the tower leading from the ringing chamber." I visited the church some years ago, but did not go into the roofs, and so missed seeing this very curious example, the only one I know in a church roof above a wood ceiling.

What I have called the pigeon house at Selby is in a tower, and it remains to be shewn that such were in towers sometimes. If they were allowed anywhere about churches we should expect to find them in towers, for there was often plenty of spare space in them well suited for the purpose; and, in fact, we do find them there.

At Birlingham near Pershore is a church with a west tower, the middle story of which is arranged for a pigeon house. The Rev. R. Duke, the rector, has kindly sent me a description of it with an old etching shewing it as it was seventy years ago, part of which I reproduce. Mr. Duke writes "Internally the walls are chequered with square recesses for the birds to nest in, such as are to be found in any old dovecote." On the south and west sides are arched loops with projecting shelves or sills below them for the birds to alight on. These are shewn on the plate. The chamber is reached from the stair which serves the rest of the tower.

In the *Ecclesiologist* Vol. XVII. p. 233, is the description of an example very like the last at Collingham Ducis, Wilts, "The tower of this church oblong in plan seems to have been originally constructed so that its middle stage might be used as a dovecote. A window or rather opening with a sill on which the birds might alight is still preserved."

These are all the examples I know of yet; but more may, I doubt not, be found. And it would not surprise me if it were shewn that it was the usual practise in the middle ages to cultivate pigeons in the void places in the roofs and towers of churches. There were pigeons at York Minster in 1497, for the keeper of the fabric then bought a net to catch them with for three shillings and eightpence and has duly entered it in his account.[1] And to this day pigeons which perhaps descend from those of monastic times make their homes in the towers and roofs of Westminster Abbey. They behave as if they thought the freehold was theirs and are quite as tame as the well-known pigeons at Venice though they do not get so much notice.

[1] York Fabric Rolls, Surtees Soc. p. 90.